

November 7, 2004
The Thirty-three Martyrs of Melitine

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Our earliest interpretation of the Book of Esther is the pre-Christian version found in the Septuagint. This version contains, not only a Greek translation of the original book, but also extensive textual interpolations that provide, in fact, a theological exposition of the story.

One of these interpolations is the "second decree" of King Ahasuerus, the decree sought by Mordecai in order to "neutralize" the king's earlier decree authorizing the annihilation of the Jews (Esther 8:9-13). Unlike the original Hebrew account, the Greek version provides a text of the decree itself (which in due course became 16:1-24 in St. Jerome's unhappy adjustment of the Latin text of Esther in the Vulgate).

An important object sought in this "second decree," let me suggest, is to provide a philosophical reflection on the problem of political power. King Ahasuerus (called Artaxerxes in this Greek version), in order to condemn the recent activity of the wicked Haman, commences with a more general consideration.

The king mentions the arrogance and cruelty sometimes engendered in the hearts of unworthy men who find themselves in positions of political power. This occurs, says the king, because such men forget "the justice of God, who sees all things and hates evil" (16:4). Politics is hazardous, because it places men in control of great power, and great power, of its own nature, has a disposition to overwhelm and seize control of the very men who exercise it.

This danger especially obtains in the case of dishonorable individuals, men of diminished character. Is there anything more perilous than a morally weak man's possession of power? If the study of history had not already versed us in this lesson, the king concludes, the recent case of Haman certainly renders the matter clear (16:7).

Some readers of the Bible may recall, in this respect, Lord Acton's dictum that "power tends to corrupt." It is important to note, I think, that Acton did not say, "power corrupts." Indeed, if that were the case, we could never have sound and wise government at all. What Acton said, rather, is that "power *tends* to corrupt." He spoke only of a tendency, a disposition, an abiding source of temptation. Like all temptations, it must be resisted. The problem is that individuals of diminished character, men unaccustomed to resisting temptation generally, are those most likely to succumb to this one in particular.

The king's decree indicates the danger of placing morally weak men in positions of power. (He conveniently doesn't mention that he himself gave Haman that power!) Political authority is prudently committed to the strong, the true men of character, especially those accustomed to the steady restraint of self-control. Surely, the first and only safe control is self-control. A man unable to govern himself cannot wisely be entrusted with the governance of anyone else (a family, for instance).

This was the case of Haman, who was no match for the tendency of power to corrupt, and in Haman's case--yet to abide with Acton--absolute power corrupted absolutely.

When the Book of Esther begins, Haman is in no danger. If he did not engage in the reprehensible behavior recorded in this book, there is every reason to believe that he would live successfully to a ripe old age. He has only himself to blame for what befalls him. Conspiring to exact a ruthless, inordinate revenge for a slight offense magnified by his grieved imagination, Haman does not realize that he plots his own ruin. Everything that happens to him he brings upon himself. Haman is no tragic figure. He is not the victim of a cruel fate. He is the casualty of his own choices, the final recipient of his own hatred and cruelty.

There is immense irony in the story of Haman of course, but Haman himself is scarcely an ironical figure. Indeed, he is the very straightforward example of a certain biblical type--namely, the Fool. Haman begins his downfall with unbridled ambition, goes on to petty resentment, and at last lets a wild rancor eat away his heart. His is a steady progression into folly and cruelty. Toward the end, there is no gauging the thing. He prepares for Mordecai a gallows 85 feet tall (5:14), an excess embodying his total lack of reasoned measure, and on that gallows he is executed, devoured by forces grown larger than himself. Haman's outward demise but certifies a deeper death within.

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